

In These Times

INDEPENDENT NEWS & VIEWS

August 6, 2001

**"IF THEY KNEW,
THEY WOULD
HAVE TO DO
SOMETHING."**

**THE UNITED STATES
REMAINS SILENT
ABOUT THE ISRAELI
OCCUPATION.**

**CHARMAINE SEITZ
REPORTS FROM GAZA**



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In These Times

INDEPENDENT NEWS & VIEWS

"... with liberty and justice for all"

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In These Times (ISSN 0160-5992) is published biweekly by the Institute for Public Affairs, 2040 N. Milwaukee Ave., Chicago, IL 60647. Periodicals postage paid at Chicago, IL and at additional mailing offices. Postmaster: Send address changes to *In These Times*, 308 E. Hitt St., Mt. Morris, IL 61054. This issue (Vol. 25, No. 18) went to press on July 6 for newsstand sales July 23 to August 6, 2001.

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Subscriptions are \$36.95 a year (\$59 for institutions; \$61.95 Canada; \$75.95 overseas). For **subscription questions** and **address changes** call (800) 827-0270.

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Publisher's Notes

When Bush, Cheney and the conservative ideologues pontificate on the American appetite for energy as an indicator of rational self-interest, they are defending a "business lifestyle"—one dominated by the marketplace values of "winner take all" and "live for today." But we can choose not to be energy gluttons. We can choose another lifestyle—one that emphasizes sustainability. To provide a reasoned response to the energy crisis, progressives need to champion their alternative lifestyle.

Conventional American political commentary identifies ideology along a one-dimensional spectrum: left, center and right. By definition, the far-left and the far-right are extremes, and the center is moderate. But this simplistic typology doesn't adequately describe politics in the United States—where behavior is multi-dimensional, and the triangle, not the straight line, is a more apt representation.

Recent demographic studies have identified three distinct American lifestyles. In their book *The Cultural Creatives: How 50,000,000 People Are Changing the World*, Paul Ray and Sherry Anderson describe contemporary society as composed of "traditionals" (25 percent), "moderns" (49 percent) and "cultural creatives" (26 percent).

Traditionals are social conservatives who live in the patriarchal, religious, rural, xenophobic, rules-based family system associated with the pre-'60s American family. Their moral code is traditional or family-values centered. The church is their dominant form of social organization. Christian conservatives can be placed in this category.

In a second corner of the contemporary political spectrum are the moderns, the denizens of consumer society. Their moral code is marketplace values—urban, cynical, hedonistic and short-term in perspective. The corporation is their dominant form of social organization. From a media perspective, modernism is the values system that dominates most of American culture.

Ray and Anderson divide the moderns into four sub groups: "economic conservatives" who are well-off represent 6 percent—these are the winners in the winner-take-all morality. The second cluster

is "conventional moderns"—folks who subscribe to marketplace values but haven't grabbed the brass ring (12 percent). The third subgroup is "the striving center"—those who are upwardly mobile and religiously conservative, mostly people of color (14 percent). The fourth cluster is "alienated moderns" who "reject all of the above in terms of values and worldviews" (17 percent). "Angry white males" can be found in this latter category.

In the third corner of the American political triangle, Ray and Anderson place the "cultural creatives," a catch-all category for people whose values are other than social and economic conservatism. Their examples are primarily environmentalists and feminists (60 percent of cultural creatives are women) with a New Age twist. Their moral code features supportive, nurturing relationships within the framework of community. Contemporary progressives can be seen as occupying this vaguely defined niche. As the book suggests, being a progressive is perhaps best defined as someone who is neither a social nor economic conservative.

When voters self-identify as conservatives (40 percent), they are either social conservatives from within the traditional lifestyle or economic conservatives from within the modern/business lifestyle. Political independents come from within the third and fourth subgroups of moderns

We need to clarify our values and emphasize what we are for rather than what we are against.

(strivers or alienated) or they are cultural creatives who do not identify themselves as "liberal" or "progressive." This last group of independents are the most likely prospects to join a revitalized progressive coalition.

To win them over we need to convey a viable alternative to the culture of marketplace values. We need to clarify our values and emphasize what we are for rather than what we are against—tying these values to specific policy issues. In my next column, I will argue that the energy crisis provides an opportunity to do so.

As always, I welcome your feedback (bburnett@inthesetimes.com).

Bob Burnett

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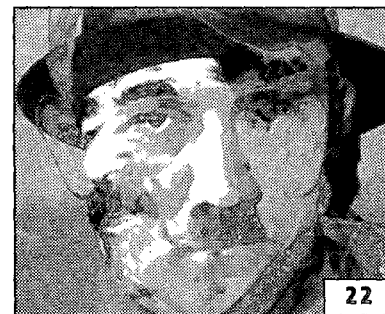
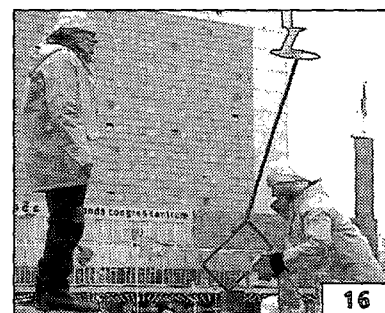
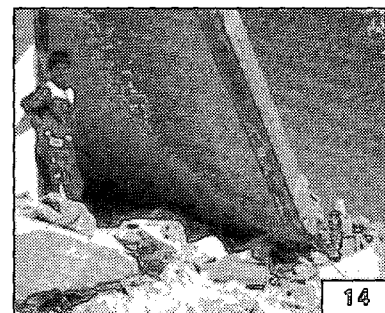
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Cover photo: Chris Smith



Letters

When To Intervene

It must be wonderful to be Edward Herman, so morally certain, so all knowing, so expert in an area where so few are ("Letters," June 25). Herman knows that the evil United States and NATO had no grounds to intervene against the Milosevic regime—this at the moment when a truck freezer filled with 85 dead Albanians, mostly women and children with signs of torture, is discovered to the horror of Serbian public opinion. That public opinion was tenderly sheltered from such nasty facts, many such nasty facts, for more than a decade.

Herman knows the destruction of Vukovar, the bombing of Dubrovnik, the three-year-long agony of Sarajevo, and the largest massacre in post-World War II Europe in Srebrenica—where more than 7,000 men and boys were murdered after surrendering—do not justify any intervention. Nor does the repression of the Albanian population of Kosovo to maintain the rule of a tiny minority of Serbs and Montenegrins. So what would? And would the interveners have to be as pure as newly fallen snow?

I am more modest in my hopes and supported Vietnamese intervention in Cambodia despite the quite unlovely character of the Vietnamese government when it came to human rights; I even supported Tanzania's intervention against Idi Amin. Worse, I rejected Hermann Goering's argument that the Nuremberg tribunal was illegitimate because victors were judging the defeated and the judges represented governments, in particular the Soviet Union, who did not have clean hands when it came to war crimes and concentration camps.

When Herman explains who can intervene with what force against murderous regimes, I will listen. Until then, I will reluctantly have to accept that sometimes the interests of NATO and the United States may coincide with the interests of greater justice.

Bogdan Denitch
Brac, Croatia

The Education President

Linda Lutton points to a possible manipulation of George W. Bush's education record ("Testing, Testing," June 25). She reports: "The number of students counted as special education students—whose scores don't factor into a school's accountability rating—nearly doubled in Texas between 1994 and 1998. The number of students taking the GED to avoid TAAS has shot up."

It is totally within plausibility that Bush may have set his sights on wanting an "education legacy" to run on for president and may

have been behind this apparent movement in Texas to double the number of students labeled as special-ed, thereby duplicitously "creating" the successes he then ran on. Has anyone looked at the process by which those classified special-ed students doubled precisely in the course of Bush's first term as Texas governor? Did he have a hand in mandating or pressuring such doubling (so as to prop up student progress)? It behooves the media to fully explore the basis on which he stands.

Carolyn Taylor
Los Angeles

Reality Check

Both the movie *Bread and Roses* and Jane Slaughter's review were close enough to reality ("Labor's Close-Up," June 25). But when Slaughter tried to draw some lessons about the state of American labor from the fate of the Justice of Janitors campaign, she left reality for conformance to a pre-established conclusion.

The Los Angeles janitors did not get absorbed in a 25,000 member local in 1990. They joined the janitors in Local 399 of SEIU. The Los Angeles janitors did not run a slate against the incumbents of the local, the health care division members did. AFL-CIO President John Sweeney did not trustee the local because of the insurgence, but because the local became completely ungovernable both politically and financially at least a year after the insurgents swept most positions on the executive board, save the presidency. Frankly, Local 399 had become politically inert years before, and many of us cheered the insurgents and the trusteeship.

There are 8 million stories in the naked city, this just ain't one of them.

Jon Showalter
Lodi, California

Reclaiming 'Right to Life'

Bob Burnett makes an excellent point about the need for powerful symbols and simple but potent ideas around which the progressive left can mobilize for effective social change ("Publisher's Notes," June 25). In this spirit, I offer the following audacious proposal: The left should seize the slogan "Right to Life" and make it a central rallying point for a truly progressive social agenda.

There is an enlightening historical precedent for the successful appropriation of an adversary's symbolic identity. Between the end of the Revolutionary War and the adoption of the Constitution in 1789, the Articles of Confederation provided a loose central governance structure for the colonies. In the debates leading up to the Constitutional Convention, the main political dispute was between the "Nationalists" and the

"Federalists," who advocated, respectively, a strong and a weak central government. But a crucial problem for the Nationalists was their name: During the war, supporters of the crown were known as nationalists, and now the constitutional Nationalists were cursed with this anti-revolutionary association. To remedy the problem, they simply stole the name "Federalists" from their adversaries, renamed their adversaries "Anti-Federalists," and asserted their ownership of this name through a series of newspaper columns known as "The Federalist Papers." The rest is history.

"Right to Life" is the perfect slogan for a third millennium social movement. Up to now this phrase has been used perversely and cynically by the religious right to mean nothing more than the "right" of a fetus to be born. As Burnett's column makes clear, we all know that the "Right to Life" really should include the rights of all children to adequate nutrition, medical care, nurturing day care, education and protection from abuse. It must include social and economic justice, environmental health, equal opportunity and a meaningful social safety net.

Ownership of the phrase "Right to Life" is clearly in the wrong hands. For the left to allow this state of affairs to go uncorrected binds us symbolically to an "anti-life" association, when in fact our sensibilities and our public policy initiatives have always been rooted in a deep appreciation of what "Right to Life" really entails.

Lorenzo Kristov
Davis, California

Amy Now!

The question of war crimes in Vietnam may be the most profound question that America has to face regarding its history as a nation since 1945 ("Something to Tell," June 25). If it is true, as I believe, that we reap what we sow, then this terrible question will have to be confronted if America is to avoid a demise greater than the demise that has befallen Communism. Until then, our best hope lies with lonely and courageous voices like Amy Goodman. May their numbers increase.

Rev. George Hunsinger
Princeton, New Jersey

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Milosevic's Reckoning

By Joe Knowles

In history's vast and dark gallery of murderous heads of state, Slobodan Milosevic is the first to be brought before an international court for an actual reckoning with the law. "It says an enormous amount about the system that we are establishing under the United Nations for international justice that Slobodan Milosevic should be on his way to The Hague," Sir Jeremy Greenstock, Britain's U.N. ambassador, exclaimed to the *New York Times*. No argument there: It does say "a lot."

Milosevic's change of address, however welcome, was hardly a neutral transfer occurring in a pure and apolitical vacuum. Timed on the eve of an international aid conference in Belgium, where \$1.3 billion in desperately needed assistance was at stake, Serbian Prime Minister Zoran Djindjic had no choice but to order the extradition, on which much of the aid was conditioned. In so doing, he ignored the Milosevic-appointed Constitutional Court, which had suspended a decree by President Vojislav Kostunica authorizing the transfer. He then acted behind the back of Kostunica, who felt that the dubious court should at least be respected while an appeal was made. The resulting furor shook the fragile democracy, and the tussle between Djindjic and Kostunica—between the republic and federal levels of government—is straining the already awkward relationship with Montenegro, Serbia's last partner in the Yugoslav federation.

That the extradition happened to take place on June 28, the 612th anniversary of the Battle of Kosovo—and the 12th anniversary of Milosevic's now infamous career-making speech—didn't help matters. To the vocal minority of Serbs who still defend him, the uncanny timing only served to feed the myth of Milosevic as national martyr.

But as poorly timed as it was, Milosevic's date with the tribunal should have come much earlier. That it finally came to this—basically a monetary transaction, foreign aid in exchange for Milosevic—says more about the intransigence of the local elite than it does about the West's handling of

that elite. He was never going to go graciously; Djindjic did the right thing by declaring, in effect, enough is enough.

Still, the West's preening hypocrisy in all this business remains odious, not least because of continuing U.S. efforts in opposition to the International Criminal Court, an institution that would make this sort of justice a palpable threat to despots and war criminals everywhere, not just those who are defeated in battle.

This double standard was glaringly demonstrated a month earlier in Paris, where a certain visiting *éminence grise* was served a summons to appear at the Palace of Justice to answer questions concerning the disappearance of five French citizens in Chile during the Pinochet dictatorship. The wanted guest in this other, less celebrated quest for justice was, of course, Henry Kissinger, who watched over and generously assisted Operation Condor, the seven-nation intelligence operation that maintained a campaign of terror against dissidents in Latin America. With the full support of the U.S.

Embassy, the retired diplomat and pricey consultant testily disregarded the subpoena and left the country.

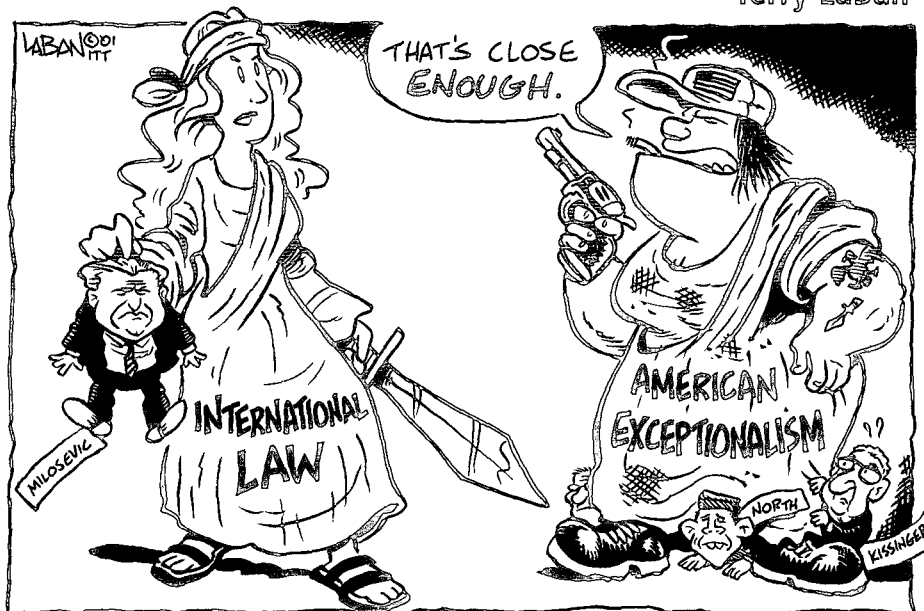
Meanwhile, Chilean Judge Juan Guzman, whose attempt to bring Pinochet to trial is slowly suffocating under the weight of his own country's elite intransigence, has asked the United States to depose Kissinger for relevant testimony. An Argentine judge likewise seeks Kissinger's intimate knowledge of that country's erstwhile bloody regime during the Condor years. Good luck.

It is worth remembering that Kissinger always took a more accommodating tone than the rest of the foreign policy establishment whenever Milosevic's name came up. Perhaps this is because the services of his firm, Kissinger Associates,

His trial is certainly welcome, but justice needs to apply to despots and war criminals everywhere.

were once retained by Yugo—remember those little cars from the '80s? They were produced by the same state-run military-industrial conglomerate that Milosevic took over and eventually used against his neighbors. Now Kissinger's kindred spirit faces trial, largely because the United States willed it so, and Serbia is obliged to confront the horrors of its past up close. But who will in turn oblige us to examine our own stained history? ■

Terry LaBan



Public Serpent

Iran-contra villain Elliott Abrams is back in action

By Terry J. Allen

A nursing home aide earning minimum wage caring for Alzheimer's patients is an unskilled laborer. A grade school teacher pulling down \$25,000 a year in a crumbling inner-city school is barely a professional. But a politician reaping power, pay, perks and retirement packages is a public servant.

Calling George W. Bush and Jesse Helms "public servants" is like calling Iran-contra criminal Elliott Abrams an "outstanding diplomat"—which is precisely what White House Press Secretary Ari Fleischer did when he announced Abrams' appointment as senior director of the National Security Council's Office for Democracy, Human Rights and International Operations. Fleischer conveyed Bush's faith-based assertion that Abrams is "the best person to do the job," which, happily for the appointee, does not require Senate confirmation.

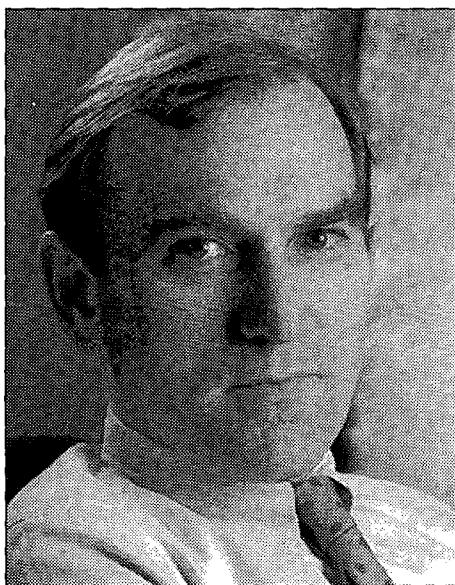
For those who don't remember, Abrams was one of the most odious participants in a particularly shameful chapter of U.S. history. In the '80s, he was Ronald Reagan's assistant secretary of state for human rights and humanitarian affairs and later the assistant secretary of state for inter-American affairs. In that post, Abrams, in his own words, "supervised U.S. policy in Latin America and the Caribbean."

That policy included backing the contras—a surrogate army dedicated to overthrowing the democratically elected Sandinista government of Nicaragua. It also involved funding the military thugocracy of El Salvador and supervising its war against a popular leftist rebellion. In his role as public servant, Abrams found time to cover up the genocidal policies of the Guatemalan government and embrace the government of Honduras while it perpetrated serial human rights abuses through Battalion 3-16, a U.S.-trained "intelligence unit" turned death squad.

Thick as thieves with Oliver North, Abrams helped evade congressional

restrictions on aid to the contras. When Congress—spurred on by protests and embarrassing press disclosures—grew wary of the Central American wars, the Reaganites sought other avenues for funding them. Ever eager to serve, Abrams flew to London under the alias "Mr. Kenilworth" to solicit a \$10 million contribution from the Sultan of Brunei.

In the congressional investigations that followed disclosure of the Iran-contra conspiracies, Abrams was never held accountable for the human rights violations backed, hidden and funded by the Reagan administration. Instead Abrams was accused of withholding information from Congress, a Washington euphemism for bald-face lying. In 1991, he copped to two counts of withholding information from Congress (and was granted a Christmas



"This snake is hard to kill," said Adm. William Crowe Jr., referring to Abrams.

Eve pardon a year later by President George Bush).

Abrams was none too pleased, even with this slap on the wrist. According to a May 30, 1994 article in *Legal Times*, he called his prosecutors "filthy bastards," the proceedings against him "Kafkaesque," and members of the Senate Intelligence Committee "pious clowns" whose *raison d'être* was to ask him "abysmally stupid" questions. (In the spirit of full disclosure: Abrams once called me a "rotten bitch" after I tactlessly noted that much of the world considers him a war criminal.)

Abrams' own "full biography," posted on the Web site of the Ethics and Public Policy Center—an oxymoronic think tank where he wiled away much of the Democratic interregnum awaiting the collective amnesia of the American public—omits his unpleasantness with Congress. In any case, as Fleischer said of Abrams' transgressions, "the president thinks that's a matter of the past and was dealt with at the time."

Loved ones of the thousand unarmed Salvadoran peasants, including 139 children, killed by U.S.-trained contra troops in the 1981 El Mozote massacre may be less inclined to let bygones be bygones. Abrams has been a consistent massacre denier, even calling Washington's policy in El Salvador a "fabulous achievement." He told Congress that the reports carried in the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* a month after El Mozote were Communist propaganda.

In 1993, members of a Salvadoran Truth commission testified about the massacre in a congressional hearing of the House Western Hemisphere subcommittee. Chairman Robert G. Torricelli (D-New Jersey) vowed to review for possible perjury "every word uttered by every Reagan administration official" in congressional testimony on El Salvador. Abrams denounced Torricelli's words as "McCarthyite crap."

Eventually documentation emerged proving that the Reagan administration had known about El Mozote and other human rights violations all along. Abrams, however, carefully denied knowledge of the assassination of Salvadoran Archbishop Oscar Romero, committed shortly after the cleric denounced government terror. "Anybody who thinks you're going to find a cable that says that Roberto d'Aubuisson murdered the archbishop is a fool," Abrams was quoted in a March 21, 1993 article in the *Washington Post*.

In fact, the *Post* notes, the U.S. embassy in San Salvador sent at least two such cables to Washington nailing d'Aubuisson, the right-wing politician who was the chief architect of the plot against Romero. The December 21, 1981 cable notes: "A meeting, chaired

by Maj. Roberto d'Aubuisson, during which the murder of Archbishop Romero was planned. During the meeting, some of the participants drew lots for the privilege of killing the archbishop."

Now Bush II has given Abrams a post that rewards his special experience. In the proud ranks of America's public servants, he will join other Iran-contra vets: Secretary of State Colin Powell; Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage; Otto Reich, assistant secretary of state for inter-American affairs; and presumably John Negroponte, awaiting confirmation as U.N. ambassador.

And who says you can't get help like you used to? ■

Contributing editor **Terry J. Allen's** work has appeared in *Harper's*, *The Nation*, *New Scientist* and other publications. She can be reached at tallen@igc.org.

AIDS Aid

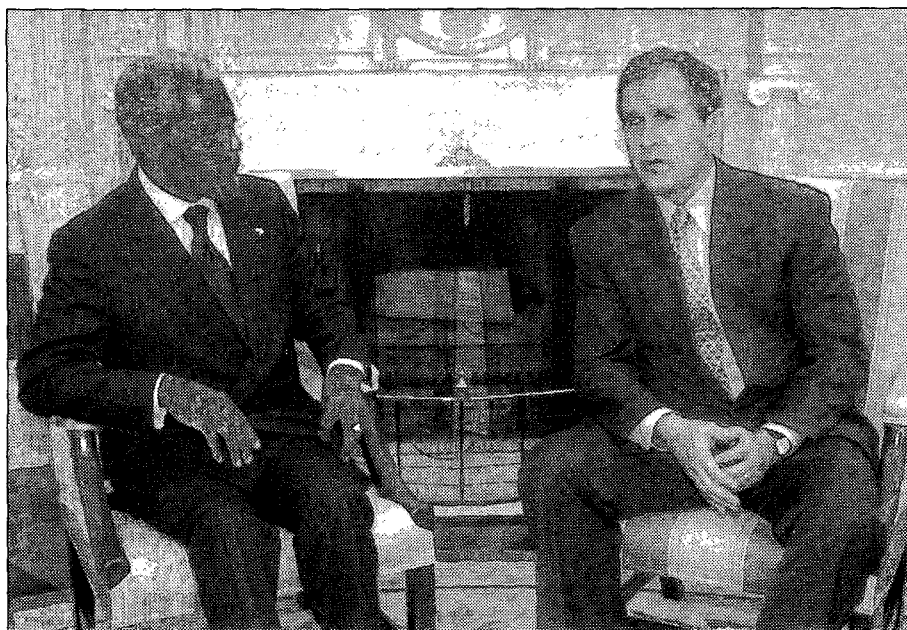
U.N. session collects the West's pocket change

By **Ben Winters**

UNITED NATIONS—Something funny happened on the way to establishing U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan's proposed Global Fund to fight HIV/AIDS: The community of nations forgot to bring their wallets.

The goal of the special session on HIV/AIDS in late June was two-fold: to adopt a U.N. Declaration of Commitment, setting specific goals for an increased response, and to inaugurate a fund of at least \$7 billion to pay the bills. "Money is needed for education and awareness campaigns for HIV tests, for condoms, for drugs, for scientific research, to provide care for orphans, and of course to improve our health care systems," Annan said, announcing the fund in Abuja, Nigeria in April. "\$7 billion sounds like a lot—and it is a lot."

In the end, "a lot" may have been too much. Before the session began, the Bush administration ponied up the first pledge, for an underwhelming \$200 million. The United States also



George W. Bush plays host to Kofi Annan in the Oval Office.

sent Secretary of State Colin Powell to the conference—along with Secretary of Health and Human Services Tommy Thompson, who kept a low profile—to vaguely suggest that there may be more to follow: "More will come from the United States as we learn where our support can be most effective," Powell said.

After the United States anted up, France and Britain dutifully made their commitments, and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation kicked in \$100 million. More pledges came from the usual suspects like Canada (\$73 million) and Norway (\$110 million, or the more impressive-sounding 1 billion kroner).

Uganda chipped in a symbolic \$2 million, but in general the fund is expected to work on the Robin Hood system: Money will come from rich nations to be distributed among needy countries in the developing world. More donations are expected in the months to come, but by the end of the session Annan seemed like the beleaguered host of a TV telethon, waiting hopelessly for pledges as the hours dragged on.

The final tally: \$644 million pledged to the Global Fund as of the end of June. The fact that only a small fraction of the hoped for amount could be cobbled together led to some rhetorical dancing around the \$7 billion figure; U.N. spokesmen now suggested that the amount represents what is needed for

the worldwide AIDS response, of which the fund is to be the cornerstone.

The hesitancy of member nations to kick in may stem from the many issues still up in the air regarding the exact purpose and organization of the fund. Not yet decided is who exactly will administer it—thus far it is envisioned as a private financial entity housed under the World Bank—or what the application process will be for the distribution of its funds. There will be a "nimble secretariat" to actually receive applications and cut the checks, and a "governing body" to be comprised of delegates from both donor and receiving countries, and representatives of civil society groups and the private sector.

This private sector presence suggested to some activist groups attending the session—including members of ACT UP and the Health GAP Coalition, who stole the spotlight with a raucous press conference and demonstration on day two—that the fund will be unhealthily skewed toward a big-business perspective. Will the fund withhold donations to nations trying to purchase those cheaper generic drugs loathed by the pharmaceutical companies? There was an audible murmur of skepticism when a U.S. delegation spokesman was asked whether any pharma groups will have a seat on the fund's board. He suggested that they "probably won't want the headache" of being involved.

A London-based nonprofit group called Christian Aid released a statement asking whether the fund is simply a giant red herring, and direly predicted that it will only divert donations from existing and effective channels: "The fund will attract little more than a token amount of money, and it is certain that a new, global bureaucracy will be required to administer it."

But if the rich nations of the world can't pony up for action on HIV/AIDS, who will? MTV, of course. Bill Roedy, president of MTV Networks International and chairman of the Global Business Council on HIV/AIDS, noted that the business of

business—"the organization, communication, delivery systems"—uniquely suits it to "play a tremendous role" in the fight against AIDS.

Roedy's statement was followed by a frank admission from former U.N. ambassador Richard Holbrooke, newly appointed CEO of the Global Business Council: "Whatever business has done so far has been grossly inadequate."

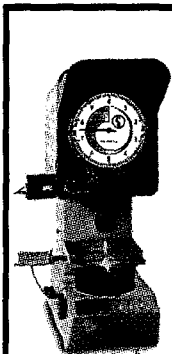
But if Annan's Global Fund doesn't begin with an effective mandate and a healthy bank statement—and if the global business community fails to turn strong rhetoric into day-to-day practice—gross inadequacies will continue to carry the day. ■

A Simple Plan

Democratic leaders plot how to take back the country

By Hugh Jackson

LOS ANGELES—Sounds simple enough. Democrats run a national campaign centered on expanding Medicare to the entire population. Roused from somnambulance, nonvoters head for the polls in droves, sweeping Democrats into Congress and the White House on a progressive plat-



Appall-o-Meter

By Dave Mulcahey

Here Comes the Judge 7.8

Some jurists are hangin' judges, others are just into B&D. Here are some highlights from the *National Law Journal's* annual survey of deviance in the halls of justice, drawn from state judicial misconduct commissions across the country:

- Judge Ellis "Beaudron" Willard of Sharkey County, Mississippi was suspended for fabricating evidence. Among other irregularities, Willard conducted court proceedings out of a business he owned, Beaudron's Pawn Shop and Tire Center. And he once arrested a clerk who insisted on going home at 11:30 p.m., subsequently sentencing her to probation.
- Truancy Court Judge Marvin Dean Mitchell of Amarillo, Texas quit the bench, but avoided prosecution for "official oppression." The judge, who was known to telephone kids on probation to check up on them, called one 15-year-old truant and demanded that she talk dirty to him, according to a complaint the girl filed. Three other teens came forward with similar stories.
- Robert E. Hollman, a Texas judge, resigned after his secretary complained to the EEOC of Hollman's propensity to tie her up. "Judge Hollman would bind [the secretary's] hands behind her back, tie her ankles together and gag her with a scarf," according to the complaint. "Judge Hollman would sometimes carry [her] bound-and-gagged ... around the office; other times, Judge Hollman would leave [her] tied to a chair or lying on the

floor for long periods of time." While she struggled to free herself, Hollman would often watch bondage videos. His lawyer claims these antics were consensual.

Greg Brady, Union Buster 4.1

You may remember him as Greg, the tidy and courteous elder son on *The Brady Bunch*. Or you may remember him as the washed-up TV star whose memoir changed forever the way you think of Florence Henderson. Barry Williams is many things to many people. To enemies of organized labor, he is a poster child.

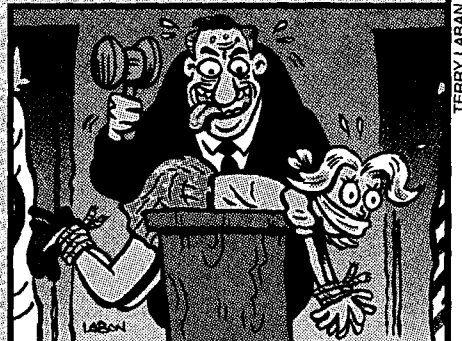
Williams is embroiled in a bitter dispute with the Actors Equity Association (AEA) over his role in a non-Equity production of *The Sound of Music*. The union has fined him \$52,000 for starring in the play, while Williams maintains that he resigned from AEA before signing on for the production. Union activists have picketed the show, carrying signs proclaiming "Greg Brady is a Scab" and chanting "Who let the scabs out?"

"In an attempt to make actors think twice about exercising their rights, AEA union bullies are making an example of Barry Williams," huffs Randy Wanke, director of legal information for the National Right to Work Foundation, in a press release on that organization's Web site. The foundation, a notorious antagonist of unions, is providing legal assistance to Williams' case against AEA before the National Labor Relations Board.

Chip of the Beast 5.8

The Digital Angel purports to be a godsend to the parents of abduction-prone children everywhere. It is a microchip that can be detected by military satellites no matter where it is, anywhere in the world. Implanted between the muscle and the skin of the forearm, the Digital Angel can tell you not only the whereabouts of your kidnapped loved one, but other key information, such as whether he/she is still alive. (That's a key bargaining advantage during ransom negotiations.)

Applied Digital Solutions, a Florida-based company, hopes to begin marketing the Digital Angel in October, according to a report in London's *Independent*. The company has one public relations hurdle to clear, however. The American Family Association, a prominent Christian group, has suggested that the Digital Angel is a portent of End Times. The chip, they say, is the "mark of the beast" mentioned in the Book of Revelation. For the time being, the company has prudently chosen to emphasize a wristwatch version of the chip.



TERRY LABAN

The PNTR Debate Is Pointless

A political-economic thought experiment: Imagine that every piece of clothing you wear, every piece of furniture you own, and every object you see in the course of an average day that is stamped "Made in China" suddenly, magically disappears—poof!

Your underwear is history. So are your shoelaces, your belt, your buttons and zippers. Your car still works—the frame and engine were made in Mexico—but you are driving on your knees because the seats were made in Shanghai. The battery-powered clocks in your office (made in Guangzhou) are gone; your secretary is grumpy because his coffee-maker (made in Zhuhai) is vamoose; the Compaq computers (made in the Shenzhen Special Economic Zone) are missing. Oh, and the telephones don't work: Millions of telecom switches, copper wires and fiber-optic cables were taken in the Sino-rapture.

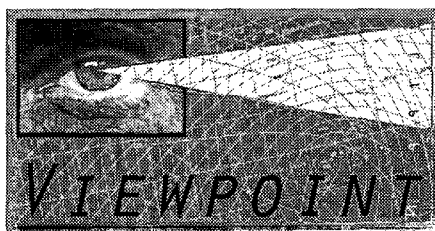
The beauty of this experiment is that it costs so much less, in dollars and tears, than the empty annual congressional debate over whether to extend "permanent normal trade relations" (PNTR, formerly "most favored nation") status to China. The strength of the experiment is its simplicity. Anyone can do it; it requires no reliance on staged political statements; and it unfailingly reveals the stark reality of U.S.-China relations. We both depend upon each other for our lives.

We are already mutually interdependent to the point that hurting the other in a significant way means hurting ourselves. It is similar in nature to the Cold War standoff in that we both have aimed at each other an insanely powerful weapon of mass destruction: the withdrawal of commercial trade. This weapon works precisely the opposite of a neutron bomb: It leaves human beings alive while making buildings, cars, clothing and a lot of infrastructure disappear. It is so destructive, practically speaking, it is impossible to use. This is the MAD-like logic of the present U.S.-China relationship.

The empty but nevertheless noisy annual PNTR debate, coming up later this summer, will therefore reach a Zen-like plateau of meaninglessness. The votes are

just not there to thwart PNTR. Still, there are sufficient numbers of China-loathing zealots on both the left and the right to ensure verbal fireworks for a week or two.

Let's quickly review the main reasons why the whole PNTR debate is pointless and, therefore, pointlessly distracting from



more important challenges facing U.S.-China relations. First, not once during the 20 years in which China's trading status has been debated annually in Congress was the threat of revocation carried out—not even after the Chinese government killed hundreds of students at Tiananmen Square in 1989. Failing to be enacted even after this butchery, what kind of leverage, what credibility, does such a threat have?

Second, linking the threat of revocation of PNTR status to China's labor, human rights and environmental crimes is logically flawed. There is no available evidence to support the idea that making good on such a threat would lead to improvements in China in any of these areas. Indeed, common sense would argue otherwise: that isolating China further would increase its sense of paranoia, push it further into poverty, and kill the economic reforms that courageous liberal elements in the Chinese government are supporting.

Third, the notion that China should be punished for its human rights crimes makes some moral sense. But so does the idea that by bringing China into a close trading relationship with the developed world, which has its own flawed but nevertheless superior labor and human rights standards, China's widespread poverty might be somewhat alleviated. Lessening the likelihood of an apocalyptic war between China and the United States

(possibly triggered by Taiwan, which has always supported PNTR for mainland China) also, surely, carries a decisive moral weight.

Finally, PNTR is not NAFTA. The latter was a case of U.S. arm-twisting of a poor nation in desperate need of cash—a fire sale at gunpoint. China is nothing of the sort. The left-liberal critique of free trade, forged in the furnace of the NAFTA struggles, is not relevant in the case of China, an emerging superpower whose size of potential annual trade with the United States dwarfs that of Mexico.

Understanding that last sentence is really the nub of the matter, but doing so is the task of another column, if not a lifetime. I lived in China for four years, and I'll say this: China is *sui generis*, the Jupiter of nations, unimaginably large and complex and impossible to generalize about.

It is not a vague Oriental romanticism from which I speak; it is rather a reporter's assessment of a society larger in population than any other on earth, most of it still plunged in poverty, and which,

Not even after Tiananmen Square was the threat to revoke China's trading status carried out.

in its efforts to pull itself up, is simultaneously experiencing most of the major human revolutions since the Neolithic Age: agricultural, industrial, consumer, capitalist, sexual, digital.

Arguing over PNTR is like arguing over burned toast while the house next door is burning down and scattering sparks on your roof. You may know that your neighbor is a paranoid dictator—and you may think him also to be a God-hater, a child-beater and a polluter—but common sense tells you that it's best to run outside to help your neighbor put the fire out.

That is, if you want to save your own shorts. ☐

Douglas C. McGill is former editor of the *Virtual China* and *China Online* Web sites and the Bloomberg News bureau chief in Hong Kong.

Teamster Players

Hoffa and Leedham are set for a rematch

By David Moberg

LAS VEGAS

As the Teamsters Union heads into fall elections for its top officers, there are really two campaigns underway. One is the presidential contest between incumbent James P. Hoffa and challenger Tom Leedham, a local union president from Oregon. The other is an effort to persuade the government to end its 12-year oversight of internal union conduct that has deeply influenced but not completely reshaped the big union, long under mob control and marred by corrupt, undemocratic rule.

With his famous name, money and the power of incumbency, Hoffa is the favorite. But Leedham, the candidate of the Teamsters' persistent if beleaguered reform movement, has a chance, since the 1.4 million members will pick their officers in a national mail-in ballot in October, thanks to the 1989 agreement between the union and the federal government. The campaign to end that consent decree is a trickier proposition, depending not only on progress in cleaning up the union, but on dicier external politics.

At the union's convention here in late June, Hoffa pursued both objectives, but the ambivalence of his leadership was on display. The union undertook major constitutional reforms that strengthened democracy, guaranteeing the continued right of members to elect constitutional delegates and top officers by mail ballots and granting autonomy to its Canadian division (proposals that Hoffa's core supporters previously had fought). Only a handful of unions give members as much direct power, and the changes are a tribute to the reform movement, the government's controversial intervention, and Hoffa's recognition—whether principled or tactical—that he must embrace internal democracy.

At the same time, Hoffa's supporters displayed impatience, if not contempt, toward the reality of democratic unionism, raising the question of how deeply the union's culture has changed and how secure democracy will be without government overseers. Although critics spoke more freely than at conventions of the '80s, there were still obstacles to open debate. Hoffa del-

egates also staged walkouts during Leedham's nomination acceptance speech and the election officer's reprimand of Hoffa for using union property to campaign. And one of the biggest standing ovations of the convention came when Chicago leader Frank Wsol opined that "we could save \$20 million [an overstated figure] if we didn't have an election."

Ultimately, the safeguard of democracy in a union is not just the official rules, but the internal political culture. On that front, the Teamsters still have a long way to go.



Teamsters President James P. Hoffa

Hoffa used the convention not only to defend his record, but to vilify previous Teamsters President Ron Carey for dividing and bankrupting the union after his 1991 election. The Carey administration certainly had its faults: Facing a perjury trial in August, Carey was removed from office for failing to stop a scheme to channel union funds through other organizations for his successful 1996 election campaign against Hoffa. When the election was re-run two years later, Hoffa beat the little-known, poorly financed Leedham, who still got nearly 40 percent of the votes (with another 5 percent going to a candidate now running with Leedham).

But the Hoffa camp exaggerates Carey's failings and ignores his achievements: The main financial drain on union coffers in the early '90s was a convention-approved increase

in strike benefits. While Carey's attacks on the "old guard" raised hackles of the union establishment, that same old guard systematically sabotaged Carey's initiatives and even union-sanctioned strikes. And Carey was the leader of the landmark 1997 UPS strike that Hoffa now celebrates without mentioning his predecessor.

Hoffa further sought to marginalize reformers in the name of "unity," even though his supporters helped keep alive the "civil war" mentality that Hoffa claimed to have ended. More than 90 percent of the delegates, most of them local union officials, supported his candidacy, including many leaders who had served in the Carey administration. Leedham had a lower percentage of delegates than Carey did in 1991. Even some officers sympathetic to Leedham saw Hoffa's election as inevitable, and

the Hoffa administration made it clear that independent local leaders would experience close scrutiny and pressure.

Despite the sea of yellow Hoffa vests at the convention and the "Hoffa, Hoffa" chants, there were cracks below the surface. One Hoffa slate member tried unsuccessfully to withdraw for an independent candidacy, and last year supporters of a key Chicago Hoffa ally had floated rumors of a rival candidacy. Insiders confirm that top-level Hoffa officials on both coasts are upset with his reliance on several controversial aides from Chicago and Detroit.

Hoffa's own record, while far from a throwback to the dark old days, is less substantial than he claims. While Hoffa says he put the Teamsters back on the road to financial strength, the union appears to have improved the balance sheet despite operating losses through various one-time accounting measures. Although Hoffa promised in 1998 to quadruple strike benefits, this year he proposed only a blue ribbon commission to study the issue, even though the union faces its two biggest contract talks in the next two years—with UPS and then the freight companies—without sufficient funds for even the current \$55-a-week strike pay. Yet Hoffa has spent several million dollars a year on a greatly increased number of multiple salaries for officials and higher spending for administration and communications, which he claimed Carey had bloated.

There is at best a mixed picture on organizing. The union reports organizing 55,000 new members over the past five years and increasing its election win rate from 35 percent in 1996 to 45 percent. But public records indicate that membership has either stabilized or dropped slightly since Hoffa took office, and the latest union election statistics compiled by the Bureau of National Affairs indicate that the win rates have changed little, ranging from 38 to 44 percent before Hoffa, then hitting 41 percent in his first year. And when Hoffa took office, he fired many organizers and cut the national organizing budget by roughly three-fifths, shifting responsibilities to the locals. Although the union has launched an intriguing national effort to organize port truckers, the once-promising campaign to organize drivers at the notoriously anti-union Overnite trucking firm has stalled in a fizzled strike.

By the time Hoffa took office, the government prosecutors and the court-established Independent Review Board had eliminated mob influence in all but a few remaining "pockets," according to attorney Ed Stier, a former Teamster local trustee hired by the union to develop a new internal ethics enforcement program called RISE (Respect, Integrity, Strength and Ethics). While Hoffa praised RISE for having protected the union from corruption over the past 18 months, it hasn't been implemented, or even fully elaborated, and thus had no chance to be tested. In its current form, RISE does not include an independent final arbiter of ethics cases, such as the United Auto Workers' Public Review Board. Furthermore, a proposal by reformers at the convention for a members' bill of rights that would go beyond existing legal requirements was overwhelmingly defeated without debate.

Corruption remains a problem, however, even among top aides and associates of Hoffa, judging from reports of the Independent Review Board. Prominent among those cases, in

May the IRB charged that William T. Hogan Jr., a powerful Chicago Teamster who was dropped from Hoffa's 1996 slate after the IRB charged him with malfeasance, and Dane Passo, another Chicagoan who had served as Hoffa's special assistant, had diverted Teamster trade show work in Las Vegas to a nonunion, low-wage temporary employment agency where Hogan's brother was an executive. The IRB also charged that a trustee Hoffa appointed to the local colluded in the deal after a previous trustee and the union's former president both had refused and were removed by Hoffa. Although Hoffa was not charged, the IRB reported that Hogan, Passo, the company chief executive and Hoffa met for a lunch during which aspects of the deal were discussed.

In another case, the IRB charged that Larry Brennan, Hoffa's former employer and sponsor, and other top officers of Detroit Local 337 improperly gave themselves raises and bonuses that were then channeled into their re-election campaign. The charges were eventually dismissed, but the ruling makes it clear that the IRB members believed the officers were guilty, even though the evidence was not strong enough to pursue the charge.


The chinks in Hoffa's record may make little difference if few members are aware of them, and most Teamsters have probably felt little impact in Hoffa's first two years. Hoffa has been involved in few contract negotiations so far, although there was serious opposition to Hoffa's settlement of contracts for Northwest Airlines flight attendants and at Anheuser-Busch, as well as criticism of the administration for disbanding programs to involve members in those contract fights.

Nevertheless, Leedham insists that Hoffa "has a record he has to run on and it isn't pretty, building personal public relations instead of the power of the union. He has promised but he hasn't delivered, and he has taken credit for successes of the previous administration, like UPS."

Leedham, an earnest, low-key campaigner who has been visiting work sites around the country for more than a year, emphasizes "rank-and-file power" as the key to better contracts and more successful organizing. He argues for expanding democracy and cutting exorbitant salaries (a pledge that Hoffa made in 1996 but later abandoned). Despite the lopsided convention and campaign war chests, he remains confident that his grassroots outreach is winning over members. Even Hoffa staffers admit that Leedham will win bigger among members than he did among delegates. "I think he's the underdog, but we've seen surprises before," argues Ken Paff of Teamsters for a Democratic Union. "Hoffa hasn't 'restored the power.' There's a lot of cynicism about Hoffa, but cynicism doesn't build a movement."

Democratic reform, rooting out crime and corruption and internal debate, however uncomfortable, have already strengthened the union. Whether Hoffa or Leedham wins this fall, expectations of the members, backed by their right to vote, will make it hard for anyone to turn back the clock entirely. The real question will be whether the union can take a big leap forward, as it did for a few dramatic weeks during the UPS strike, and make the power of an educated, active membership the heart of the union. ■

"There's a lot of cynicism about Hoffa, but cynicism doesn't build a movement."



**"IF THEY KNEW,
THEY WOULD
HAVE TO DO
SOMETHING."**

**THE UNITED STATES
REMAINS SILENT
ABOUT THE ISRAELI
OCCUPATION.**

BY CHARMAINE SEITZ

CHRIS SMITH

Wreckage in Rafah.

GAZA STRIP

Yasser is an 11-year-old boy who lives along Gaza's border with Egypt. I met him in April after the Israeli army had razed the homes of more than 400 Palestinians, including his own. Tanks entered the refugee camp near midnight, forcing the families from their beds and bulldozing the houses in their wake.

"So we hate you," he says matter-of-factly when he learns that I am American.

Like most Palestinians, Yasser believes it is the United States that allows this to happen. I try to explain that many Americans don't even know what his life is like. And then I hear him say, almost to himself, "Yes, because if they knew, they would have to do something."

In these southern regions of the Gaza Strip, daily life defies such logic. It was here on May 22, just hours after Israel's defense minister "ordered the army to cease fire and to follow regulations for opening fire that are activated when lives are in danger," that Israeli troops made three incursions into areas under Palestinian Authority control, demolishing one house and bulldozing Palestinian fields.

The next afternoon, 45 Palestinians, many of them young children, were injured near the border town of Rafah as Israeli tank gunfire and shell blasts pierced the stifling desert heat. Cease-fire or not, residents say this was a normal day. "It is difficult to work, to move, to sleep," says 66-year-old Hasan Tahrawi. "What can you say when you see airplanes shooting, and tanks? There is nothing I can say or do."

Israel has occupied Gaza since the 1967 Six Day War, when it defeated the Egyptian army here. Peace agreements with Palestinians have created areas of Palestinian Authority control, while leaving more than 6,000 Israeli settlers on the remainder of the land. But since the September start of the

Aqsa Intifada—the Palestinian uprising against continuing Israeli occupation and growing settlements—Israeli incursions into Palestinian Authority areas have become commonplace.

On June 23, just 10 days after CIA Director George Tenet personally set into motion a plan that called for several weeks of "calm" before a return to talks, Israeli tanks again invaded the Rafah refugee camp at 3 a.m., bulldozing another 20 homes. An Israeli army spokesman described the demolitions as "engineering works," claiming it was a response to shooting from the houses. But those who live there, while admitting that Palestinian shooters do fire at Israeli positions, were adamant that they certainly have not done so from these residences.

The Israeli incursions have met with feeble international protest. The only time that Israeli troop movements in the Gaza Strip incurred U.S. condemnation was in the week after the demolition of Yasser's home—when the Israeli military invaded three swathes of Palestinian-controlled territory, cutting off Palestinian population centers from one another. The soldiers appeared to be preparing to stay, and only then did Secretary of State Colin Powell issue a bluntly worded statement. The army was gone in hours.

Since mid-April, however, the army has carried out similar incursions, invading and then bulldozing Palestinian land more than a dozen times. Other invasions have lasted just minutes and effectively weakened the lines of Palestinian control set down in previous peace agreements. "There appears to be no genuine security justification [for these demolitions]," says Richard Falk, a member of a U.N. commission to the area, "and even if there were, Israel could proceed in a far less inhumane manner: giving notice, providing alternative housing, offering compensation and making a demonstration of security needs."

Machine Love

By Joshua Rothkopf

We fade in on huge churning waves, not a bad place to start: Steven Spielberg's *A.I.* pegs our end of days as waterlogged, with whole cities drowned under melted ice-

A.I.: Artificial Intelligence
Directed by Steven Spielberg

caps. It's the future and people now live in places like New Jersey—comfortably, in fact—thanks to science: Robots fill the void imposed by ecological disaster and strict sanctions on pregnancy. That's a lot of doom and zoom to be riding in on those cresting waves, and you brace yourself for the chop—just as Spielberg must have when he picked up this project from the late Stanley Kubrick, who, insiders say, secretly obsessed on its finer points for decades.

But Spielberg, as toned and well-positioned as he is, just can't surf these waves; they might have even thrown the master. At its essence a retelling of the lost-boy Pinocchio story bathed in a meticulously imagined high-tech universe, *A.I.* has the overpowering taste of a dense French reduction left to stew for too long; it's so saturated with baroque detail and curly-cue plot extensions that you choke on the richness. It's like a million hours spent playing with the same toy.

This is not the typical problem that sinks most summer blockbusters, that mysterious alchemy by which the input of dozens of high-paid and presumably talented writers is somehow combined into a lump of coal. *A.I.* is deliberate in a way than can only be attributed to its two chief creators, Kubrick, the mechanic supreme, and Spielberg, the great pop impresario. As such, it's a psychotic piece of filmmaking, but a strangely personal one too, a mythic boyhood fantasy (*E.T.*, *The Empire of the Sun*) modeled on a blueprint made by a HAL computer. The strangled result, while never less than arresting, is the most maddening of failures, a double-

stymie of genius: a Kubrick film literalized to the point of obviousness, a Spielberg film largely choked off from emotion.

Someone must have thought this was a good idea, maybe Spielberg himself, though his fulfillment of *A.I.* strikes me as duty as much as tribute. (There may have also been guilt: At one point he agreed to a formal collaboration with Kubrick but extricated himself after a month or so of intense transatlantic faxing.) At any rate, *A.I.* is certainly the most expensive honor ever paid a 90-page treatment, itself based on a one-gag short



We are the robots.

story by sci-fi author Brian Aldiss called "Supertoys Last All Summer Long," published 30 years ago and expanded over time by other writers, primarily novelists Ian Watson and Sara Maitland.

Whatever spark was there though, holding Kubrick's interest for 25 years and burning unspeakable amounts of development money, will remain a mystery, now even further obscured by Spielberg's personalized version of the

material. (The rambling screenplay is his first since *Poltergeist*.) But how could it not be? Kubrick, more than anyone else, depended on his own eye and stylized remove for his work's transcendence.

O.K., so *A.I.* isn't a masterpiece rescued from an untimely death. It's here, though, and if hosannas aren't exactly in order there's certainly a lot of captivating whiz-bang to process, starting with the slightly menacing first scene—a robotics lecture given by William Hurt, who calls on his company to create a "mecha" who can love. It's an erudite chamber of the gods: self-satisfied with their progress and quick to applaud. (Hurt seems too wan a presence for the required arrogance; it's a part that calls for one of those plummy scientists from *A Clockwork Orange*.) Not five minutes in and we're already at a meta moment, where the creation of robot life can be swapped for the creation of cinema: Spielberg prevails (of course) as the benign god of what we see here—dramatically lit scientists with good intentions hesitating at moral quandaries—over what would have likely played as all-too-human buffoonery in the lapsed church of Kubrick.

Suddenly it's 20 months later and their experiment is a reality. Enter David (Haley Joel Osment), a serenely beautiful child stepping tentatively into his adoptive parents' foyer. Osment's debut, so haunted and intuitive in *The Sixth Sense*, heralded a talent unseen since the lankier days of Jodie Foster, and he's clearly the real deal. With *A.I.*, he has applied himself to a plasticine weirdness that would be a challenge to any actor, masking layers of expressiveness under artificially designed wraps. He's almost too perfect when he calmly asks, "Would you like me to go to bed now?" (The question is certainly a first in the history of child-rearing.)

Spielberg stretches out in this initial section, and you might be surprised by how far he strays from familiar ground, leaving behind the picture of idyllic family life for some sharp commentary. David gives his owners the creeps, jolting them to nervous glances at the dinner table after a pre-programmed explosion of

laughter at the sight of a hanging spaghetti strand. It's an expertly timed exchange, free of dialogue—a sly gloss on a saccharine, take-a-photo moment. Elsewhere, Spielberg is provocatively dark, especially after the couple's real son, Martin, returns home from a cryogenic deep-freeze in which he was suspended while awaiting a cure for his disease. He soon becomes a nasty rival, spurring David to self-mutilation and competition; he even forces their teddy bear (itself an ingenious robot with the clipped adult voice of a Joe Friday detective) to choose between them.

There's a built-in irony to these brothers, the sickly Martin with his motorized leg braces and David, his durable but disposable surrogate who at one point stares blankly from the bottom of a swimming pool, forgotten in a panic that attends only to flesh-and-blood emergencies. A.I. teases us with a whiff of greater dimensions—something to do with human fallibility, a quest for perfection only attained in the making of perfect things. But in striving for that kind of cynicism (so natural to Kubrick, who breathed bleaker air), Spielberg sweats himself into uncomfortable shrillness. For all his fluidity, he's just no good at metaphysics. Thus Martin becomes a tiny terror and David a saintly unfortunate soul, impossible not to love.

Worse still are the parents, set up strictly for easy contrast: Monica is an unnaturally fickle mother, exposing and closing her heart to David like a shell-game hustler (Frances O'Connor has one quiet, overwhelmed moment looking in the mirror that hints at unexplored depths); Henry (Sam Robards) goes from a can't-we-keep-the-puppy earnestness to fear and callousness in between edits.

So when Monica invites David for a drive in the country, we already know what's in store for him; the archetypal abandonment in the woods has a shamelessness to it ("I'm sorry I didn't tell you about the world," she says, fleeing) that obliterates whatever critical distance remains. David may still be a replaceable product, but his heartwrenching pleas ("I'll be so real for you!") make that status almost an afterthought. So why introduce high-concept underpinnings in the first place, given the cost of parts?

It's right around now—after Spielberg has hammered David into his kind of robot, adorable and misunderstood—that A.I. becomes a dangerously innocuous affair. Determined to become a real boy and regain his mother's love, David wanders across a pile of robotic carnage, limbs and jaws jutting out like Holocaust photography. This scene and his subsequent captivity at a "flesh fair," where robots are chain-sawed and melted down for the entertainment of screaming hordes in bleachers, are as nightmarish as anything Spielberg has ever attempted, brutal and visceral as *Schindler's List*.

Their success, though, relies on the transference of robots into persecuted outsiders: wandering mechanical Jews flung into tragic circumstances. It all seems a bit easy, given this project's pedigree. Robots are people too, it says (and thanks for the tip, Steven), but this must surely be a retreat from the indictment Kubrick was likely planning. "They made us too smart, too quick and too many," is the most telling line, spoken resignedly by Jude Law in a slick turn as a lover robot on the run; greater stuff of fate and folly was definitely in mind.

But Spielberg's sticking with Kid A: airless set pieces pile up long after any quest for a Blue Fairy should have reasonably ended, finally propelling us to the submerged skyscrapers of Manhattan and a properly Kubrickian coda thousands of years later. John

Williams' score swells (what else does it know how to do?) and one ultimately realizes that someone's played a big joke on poor David. Was it the scientists who programmed him to love a monster mom? (And why can't the super-advanced robots who greet him on the other side of an ice age help him out with that little bug?) Or was it Spielberg who programmed us to respond so helplessly to a machine in child's clothing? To say that A.I. ends in a dreamlike vacuum of self-absorption may be putting it too bluntly: Spielberg puts all his chips on his young lead—now the only "human" in sight—and we're dragged down into a weird oblivion of Oedipal bliss, uncomfortably close in tone to a golden-hued coffee commercial.

Call it a draw. A.I. never does truly mesh its two artistic sensibilities as some critics are gushing—it's more like mash. (Or mush.) Kubrick's hundreds of sketches and notes are the real artificial intelligence here, implanted in a filmmaker whose triumphal moments—on the shark boat or making mystical mountains out of mashed potatoes—have risen above thought to pure kinetic pleasure. If you smell burning wires, it's due to intellectual overload. I fear this new sentient Spielberg: He is at once our greatest mass communicator and our least analytical. Only a snob can dismiss his work outright; only the patronizing can call A.I. his breakthrough. ■

The Devil in the Details

By Eugene McCarraher

What, another French intellectual? Another Parisian mandarin bedecked in all the floating signifiers of postmodern significance: the ostentatious knowingness, the oracular pronouncements, the prose that spawns an industry of commentary? After Derrida and Foucault, Baudrillard and Kristeva, Lacan and Irigaray, what difference—or is it *différance*?—does another *pensant* make?

At a glance, Alain Badiou will seem like all the other Gallic imports. A professor of philosophy in the École Normale Supérieure, he occupies a pres-

tigious perch in the humanist echelons of the French technocracy. He uses ugly words like "subjectivation," "eventality," and "simulacrous" (a fault for which

Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil

By Alain Badiou

Verso

224 pages, \$27

his translator, Peter Hallward, might be partly culpable).

But a perusal of *Ethics* reveals that he isn't quite like his predecessors.

Still beholden to the spirit of the May Days, Badiou strikes out in a direction very different from those followed by other *soixante-huitards* like Andre Glucksmann on the right or Andre Gorz on the left. More like the late Cornelius Castoriadis, or the super-contemporary Slavoj Zizek, Badiou seeks a new moral and political language for the democratic left, one that draws with unabashed facility on classical and religious sources.

Badiou writes out of an urgent need to rekindle a revolutionary vision and militance in the face of neoliberalism. Like others on the left (especially in France), Badiou identifies neoliberalism with the swaggering hegemony of the United States, a "democratic totalitarianism" that imposes liberal democracy and unbridled capitalism in the name of universal human rights. The NATO war on Serbia, the sanctions against Iraq, the isolation of Cuba, the creation of NAFTA, GATT and Maastricht—all comprise a bloody and opulent regime of "American imperialism and European servility." This neoliberal imperium rests, not only on the West's economic and military power, but on a technocratic political culture whose contentious surface hides a firm consensus about the supremacy of capital. This "belligerent impotence" characterizes even left-wing parties, tamed and denatured by "disappointment and broken promises."

So far, so good—but also fairly uncontroversial, at least on the left. Badiou's provocation begins with his examination and rejection of what he calls "ethics," what we might call the neoliberal moral order. This moral order insists on certain universal and inviolable "rights of man"—the inheritance of the Enlightenment—and on "respect for the Other," a related but only recently emphasized element also known as "difference," "multiculturalism" and so on. Badiou's critique of the "rights of man" as bourgeois ideol-

ogy is as incisive (and as old) as Marx's. His repudiation of the discourse of "otherness" and "difference" (or what he sometimes calls "culturalism") is more certain to perplex and anger many on the left.

He certainly doesn't help his case by adopting the posture of boldness: "I [have] taken the risk of saying frankly something that is uncomfortable to say." Now while "I know it's not p.c. to say this, but ..." can arguably pref-

sponsored in campus halls and advertising agencies. "Good others," on the other hand, exhibit differences that are remarkably consonant with "the identity of a wealthy West." Indeed, with its mantra of "inclusion" and its vagueness about "the exact political meaning of the identity being promoted," identity politics supplies exotic grist for the corporate mills of Western democracies. Thus, in Badiou's view, "difference," cast in the image and likeness of con-



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ace a volley against cant, more often it just steals the thrill of heterodoxy for some conventional mite of spleen or bigotry. Still, it's worth remembering that suspicion of "multiculturalism" isn't confined to the right. Terry Eagleton, Todd Gitlin and Russell Jacoby, to cite a few, have noted the obscurantism and intellectual shoddiness of a great deal of talk about "diversity" and "difference." Badiou joins this left chorus of disgruntlement but offers a philosophical alternative that acknowledges and resituates the merits of "otherness."

While purporting to "respect difference," the acolytes of otherness are "clearly horrified," Badiou observes, "by any vigorously sustained difference." Arguing that genuine difference entails conflict, Badiou contends that "difference" is really a recipe for homogeneity and consensus. By this token, left-wing militants, along with Christian and Islamic fundamentalists and African practitioners of clitorrectomy, are stigmatized as "bad others" and disinvited from those "celebrations of diversity"

sumerism, joins "rights" as rhetorical camouflage for Western economic and military domination.

Neoliberal ethics also presumes an understanding of evil as pain, suffering and intolerance, epitomized as "radical Evil" in the Nazi extermination of the European Jews. This conception creates three problems for "ethics" in Badiou's view. As evil becomes, in effect, the regulative principle of liberal moral thought, then any collective attempt to achieve justice and freedom—"the Good"—can be stigmatized by association with fascism and Communism. Also, if happiness (defined as prosperity and pleasure) becomes the *summum bonum*, then any and all attempts to supply it are legitimate—including imperialism.

At the same time, the assertion that the Holocaust is "unthinkable and unsayable" removes genocide both from historical explanation and from historical intervention. The fact that the Nazi genocide is also "constantly invoked and compared" (Badiou notes the facile

comparisons of Nasser, Saddam and Milosevic to Hitler) renders "radical Evil" even more suspect. "Radical Evil" does more to underwrite Western interests than to foster a genuine consciousness of iniquity.

As caustic and over-the-top as Badiou's assertions can be, they counter the ensemble of platitudes about "diversity" and "otherness" that now passes for iconoclasm, not only on the left, but in much of American life. Corporate admakers, university administrators and cultural studies profs now "celebrate diversity." Among students, the incantation of "respect for other cultures" can now make for uneasy silence when an unambiguous condemnation of clitorrectomy would be in order. And as Arno Mayer and Peter Novick might agree, the radicalization of evil has imputed an almost sacral aura to the Nazi genocide that resists attempts at historical understanding. You don't have to affirm Badiou's polemical overkill to believe that the lexicon of "difference," "diversity" and "evil" is long overdue for critical reformulation.

To this end, Badiou poses an "ethic of truths" against neoliberal "ethics." This ethic of truths is not hostile to differences—the covert reality of liberal "otherness"—but rather is "indifferent to differences." Where the rhetoric of "the Other" disarms revolutionary politics by focusing on "trifling descriptions" of what is, Badiou's ethical discourse of "the Same" both announces "a truth [that] is the same for all" and points toward "what comes to be." Only this recognition of "the Same" can remedy the contemporary world's "incapacity ... to name and strive for a Good."

Although "the Good" has marked a distinctly authoritarian lineage in political philosophy from Plato to Leo Strauss, Badiou insists that only this vaguely spiritual conception accounts for the will to emancipation, the allure of reaction and the reality of evil. On all three points Badiou, like Žižek, secularizes ideas derived from theology. Acknowledging his reliance on the letters of St. Paul (the subject of an untranslated book), Badiou contends that the imagination for a new left

politics must allow for secular notions of "immortality," "fidelity," "grace" and "evil," all of which flow from a quasi-religious understanding of "truth" and "event."

Human beings, Badiou maintains, are "immortal," capable of entering "into the composition and becoming of some eternal truths." "Truth"—an unfolding of human possibility—

Does evil, far from being the mere opposite of good, arise out of the deepest and noblest desires of the human heart?

emerges from "events," unsettling and exhilarating historical episodes that can be neither predicted nor controlled. Those open to the "possibility of the impossible" can extend those events into liberating political movements by their "fidelity" to the revelation. Exemplified in the early Christians, the Jacobins, the Bolsheviks and the Red Guards, revolutionary fidelity calls on its adherents to "seize in your being that which has seized and broken you."

To a generation spoonfed on irony, this depiction of revolutionary ontology and commitment might seem romantic at best and frightening at worst. Myself, I don't see how any politics of liberation—from the catacombs of Rome to the streets of Seattle—can get very far without a utopian impulse and zeal.

Moreover, Badiou realizes that truth defined in this existential manner can be betrayed, forced or simulated. On this last score, his all-too-brief discussion of Nazism is insightful. Defining evil as a "simulacrum of the truth," Badiou asserts that it appears as "the (possible) effect of the Good itself," indeed is possible "only through an encounter with the Good." We can understand Nazism if we appreciate that "only in so far as it could be repre-

sented as [the Good] did it 'seize' the German situation."

This formulation goes farther than the banal observation that the Nazis manipulated the German people. Fascism appealed to a venerable longing for community, Badiou implies. If so, then evil, far from being the mere opposite of good, arises out of the deepest and noblest desires of the human heart.

But why should truth take any false and murderous form? How does evil happen? Though he doesn't acknowledge it (though I doubt he doesn't know it), Badiou's account of evil resembles that of Saint Augustine. Badiou's definition of evil as a "simulacrum" of truth recalls Augustine's understanding of evil as a "perversion" of good—a notion that, in robbing evil of any primacy, allows and even mandates a politics rooted in truth rather than interest. In fact, shorn of the sexual connotations that obscure its import and power, "perversion" suggests that the truth is, in the end, in our interest, and that it will ultimately set us free. But Augustine, unlike Badiou, maintained that there was something perverse about our own will to truth—not something fragile about the truth itself—that could mislead us so horrifically.

"Whence will renewal come to us?" Simone Weil asked in *Gravity and Grace*. "From the past alone, if we love it." This is the language of tradition, remembrance and devotion—a language spoken with facility and often with fraudulence on the right. Now more than ever, perhaps, the left needs to complement its proficiency in the language of power and ideology with a fluency in the parlance of truth and fidelity. Spoken and written with this graceful zealotry, it would no longer be an empty and conservative irony to observe that the more things change, the more they stay the same. ■

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The Homecoming

By Benjamin Kunkel

Israel has denied Palestinians many things over the years besides self-determination and the right of return: water rights and building permits, economic development and freedom of movement. In all of this, the diplomatic and financial support of the United

I Saw Ramallah
By Mourid Barghouthi
The American University
in Cairo Press
184 pages, \$19.95

States has been crucial and, particularly in America, Palestinians have also lacked something else—"permission to narrate," in Edward Said's phrase. Here the story of Israel generally belongs to its boosters, even if this means the suppression of inconvenient facts and the virtual exclusion of Palestinian writers from the mainstream.

This is the context in which poet Mourid Barghouthi's memoir appears, if appears is the word. Barghouthi, born in a village outside of Ramallah, was studying in Cairo when the Six Day War broke out. Thus when Israel conducted a census of its subject population and Barghouthi, along with many others, was not there to be counted, he lost his right to return. Only in 1996, after 30 years of exile, did Barghouthi receive a temporary reunion permit. *I Saw Ramallah* is the account of his homecoming to an occupation. Published in English in January, this humane and eloquent book, which won the 1997 Naguib Mahfouz Medal and enjoys the ostensible good fortune of topicality and a fine translation, has been ignored outside of publications specializing in the Middle East. Such omissions are worth noting when we are probably about to receive,

from those possessing the permission to narrate, a somewhat redundant lesson in the politics of language.

"When the history of our era is written," writes Martin Peretz in his own *New Republic*, "terror will be seen as the Palestinians' distinctive contribution to modern politics." Never mind for now that the founding fathers of Israel, like those of Ireland and Algeria and many other post-colonial nations, were terrorists in the strictest sense of the term. The immediate consequence of using terrorists to symbolize Palestinians may soon be to license, in the words of the *Jerusalem Post*, "eliminating the Palestinian Authority and reoccupying Palestinian-controlled territory."



Barghouthi came back to an occupied Ramallah.

Ariel Sharon just concluded a listening tour of the United States and Britain, looking for reassurance this will be all right with everyone. Resemblances to the early summer of 1982, before the "Peace for Galilee" invasion of Lebanon began, are unmistakable: Sharon is back in power and again looking for a ceasefire to break rather than hold. As the Israeli journalist Uri Avneri wrote in August of that year, the "original sin" of his colleagues was to use the word *mehablim*, or "terrorist," for "all PLO fighters" and ultimately for "the whole of the Palestinian people."

It is unfortunate to use up so much of a review before discussing the book itself, but war dwarfs all books. Besides, one of the special virtues of Barghouthi's book is its modesty. In a region blighted by competing versions of The Book, Barghouthi has been content to write what is merely a book. *I Saw Ramallah* is fractured, provisional and honest; its last sentence, fittingly, is a question. More than this, Barghouthi has an aversion to the symbols that are the intellectual currency of war and occupation: "All conflicts prefer symbols. Jerusalem is now the Jerusalem of theology. The world is concerned with ... the idea and the myth of Jerusalem, but our lives in Jerusalem and the Jerusalem of our lives do not concern it."

But it is not only Israeli irredentism that relies on symbols. Exile from their homeland makes Palestinians susceptible to myth-making as well, forcing them to "adore an unknown beloved." When Barghouthi crosses into the West Bank for the first time in three decades, he discovers a country not nearly so green as he remembered it. He looks at the land and asks himself, "What is so special about it except that we have lost it?" And while he is happy to return, as his brother who died in Jordan was never allowed to do, it does not gratify him that some things are just as they were: "The Occupation forced us to remain with the old. ... It did not deprive us of the clay ovens of yesterday, but of the mystery of what we would invent tomorrow."

I Saw Ramallah is a rare memoir, anti-nostalgic and unromantic. Part of its charm is that Barghouthi, by nature an unpolitical man, wishes it could also be without politics. Even when on a march he can't bring himself to shout slogans, and he prefers to all symbolism "the scent of dark coffee and cardamom coming from the dark end of the guesthouse wall." But with most Palestinians living either under occupation or as refugees, politics are inescapable, entering "into the most miniature details of the souls of our men and our women." *I Saw*

Ramallah is best at illustrating the fear-some extent of the occupation—an occupation not only of land, but finally of thoughts and gestures.

And, of course, of the storyline. Barghouti's often funny book—he belittles the noble etymologies of his surname and concludes that it must be derived from *al-barghout*, or “the flea”—is strik-

ingly free of anger. This makes its single cry the more telling: “The Israelis occupy our homes as victims and present us to the world as killers.”

It seems likely that large numbers of the “killers” are about to get killed. “Sharon Visit Will Pitch Retaliation,” ran a headline in the June 25 *Los Angeles Times*. This pitch might be a

harder sell here if Palestinians more often got to speak for themselves. As it is, desperate young men in the occupied territories are not altogether wrong in feeling that, as far as we are concerned, they are most eloquent as corpses. ■

Benjamin Kunkel has written for *The Nation*, *Dissent* and other publications.

Unlikely Agitator

By Julie Greene

In 1903, Mary Harris “Mother” Jones, then 66 years old, led a march of 100 boys and girls from Philadelphia to New York to protest child labor. Once in New York, Mother Jones accepted an invitation from an animal show owner on

Mother Jones: The Most Dangerous Woman in America

By Elliott J. Gorn
Hill and Wang
408 pages, \$27

Coney Island to come visit, where she used his stage to give an address. Jones spoke in front of a huge portrait of Roman emperors (with their thumbs pointed down), while chained lions punctuated her speech with roars. She theatrically indicted capitalism and compared it to the brutality of Roman gladiator shows. On the stage stood several animal cages, with children from the mills of Philadelphia locked inside them. They symbolized, Mother Jones declared, the attitudes of American employers toward the children who worked for them.

She then declared that she and the marchers would visit President Theodore Roosevelt to convince him to end the enslavement of children. Further, she noted, “I will tell the president that I saw men in Madison Square last night sleeping on the benches and that the country can have no greatness while one unfortunate lies out at night without a bed to sleep on.” This astonishing political spectacle suggests the powers of one of America’s most creative agitators at the peak of her abilities.

Here lay Mother Jones’ great strength—an ability to connect with and

move great masses of people through words, skillful use of the legend she had become, and, in this case, a heavy dose of visual stimulation. We all know about Mother Jones, but over the years our sense of her has become one-dimensional.

Elliott Gorn’s new biography, *Mother Jones: The Most Dangerous Woman in America*, restores some of her complexity, and this is the great achievement of his fascinating book. “Perhaps it is best to think of Mother Jones as a character performed by Mary Jones,” he notes insightfully. “She exaggerated her age, wore old-fashioned black dresses, and alluded often to her impending demise.”

As Gorn takes us through her long history, he explores some of the most dramatic moments in American labor history, from the anthracite strikes of the 1890s, to child-labor campaigns in the early 20th century, to the violent mining wars in West Virginia and Colorado during the 1910s.

Born in Ireland, Mary Harris lived through the terrors of the potato famine, fled to Canada and then the United States, worked as a teacher and as a dressmaker, moved to Memphis and married George Jones, an iron molder and union man. Soon after that, in 1867, she watched powerlessly as her entire family (four children and her husband) fell victim to yellow fever and died. Between this tragedy and her emergence in the 1890s as “Mother Jones” we know even less about her. She moved to Chicago and returned to her trade as a dressmaker. She seems to have grown active in the labor movement during the 1880s, joining the Knights of Labor; yet



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Did she know best?

we have no clear understanding of how or why she became radicalized.

With so little evidence to go on, Gorn nimbly analyzes the larger contexts of Irish and American history to shed light on his subject. In one of the most interesting—and probably controversial—sections of the book, he explores rumors that Jones spent some of her time during these decades working as a prostitute or running a brothel. Historians routinely have rejected the charges as false, because they came from an anti-labor newspaper. But Gorn, while agreeing such historians are

probably right, believes the charges worth investigating anyway.

He notes that none of Mother Jones' prominent friends would publically refute the charges when the paper made them in 1904. Furthermore, as Gorn describes it, Jones "once hinted obliquely that there might be something" to the charges when, in a discussion about them with United Mine Workers organizer Duncan MacDonald, she commented, "Don't you think whatever my past might have been that I have more than made up for it?" Macdonald believed this to be a confession. Throughout her life, Jones' enemies repeatedly rehashed these charges to try to undermine her. From today's perspective, however, it is intriguing to think that some of Jones' radicalism may have been fueled by her participation in the world and the problems faced by working prostitutes.

But by the early 20th century, Mother Jones' past had become carefully buried. She emerged as a great legend of American labor activism. And although she believed deeply in the socialist cause, Mother Jones was not one for formal political ties; after brief flirtations with both the Socialist Party and the Wobblies, she remained distant from both. Her longest organizational affiliation was with the United Mine Workers, but even there she seemed to develop more enemies than friends among the leadership. The rank-and-file workers mattered to her, not their leaders or institutions.

With an energy that seems remarkable for someone her age, she crisscrossed the country. She organized to raise funds for Big Bill Haywood and Charles Moyer when they sat in prison, accused of murder; she worked energetically to support the Mexican revolution; and, of course, she joined the struggles that pushed her to the peak of her fame: the mining battles in West Virginia and Colorado. Here she became known not only for spell-binding speeches, but also for dynamic organizing tactics. She hiked through streams when the mining corporations banned travel through their property; she faced down court injunctions and suffered the indignity of jail, time and again, always knowing that such ruggedness would rally the troops and generate national publicity like nothing else.

Through it all, she played up the contradictions of her position and the drama

embedded in them. An older woman dressed in respectable clothes, she gave furious speeches, swearing and shouting at the injustices working men and women faced. Emphasizing her identity as the mother of all the workers, with all the loving and nurturing qualities that suggested, she could castigate not only enemies but even her beloved workers, demanding that they live up to their manhood and stop behaving like weaklings.

While it is difficult to quantify the impact of an agitator like Mother Jones, Gorn makes it clear that she helped workers win national publicity, inspired rank-and-file workers to greater and more persistent militancy. And, Gorn seems to suggest, she often helped move

Her cultivated image of domesticity, while exploited to great effect, also supported patriarchal notions of a woman's place.

strikes away from issues of food and wages and toward "much larger issues of freedom, dignity, and the rights of citizens."

Yet Mother Jones also possessed important weaknesses. Particularly as she grew older, she sometimes placed too much faith in her ability to convert her enemies. She met with John D. Rockefeller Jr., labor's top villain in the Colorado coal wars (which culminated in the Ludlow Massacre), and then, accepting his claims of non-involvement, publically proclaimed, "I don't hold the boy responsible." Congressional investigation would soon prove just how involved Rockefeller had been. In one of her final battles, in West Virginia during the early 1920s, while in her mid-eighties, Mother Jones grew friendly with the state's governor and faced charges that their close relationship led her to betray the workers' cause when she urged them to end a strike. She never fully recovered from this incident, and her final decade was marked by gradually failing health and efforts to establish her place in history by writing an autobiography.

Perhaps her greatest weakness, however, came from the same domestic ideal she exploited so well in creating her motherly persona. Gorn argues effectively that domesticity, the notion of the loving and asexual mother, dominated Mother Jones' image and helped her achieve a moving effect by masking her fiery radicalism. Unfortunately, it also trapped her into supporting conservative notions of a woman's place: "She thundered her message of labor solidarity from a thousand rostrums, then told women that their most important tasks were being good wives and mothers." Similarly, her emphasis on family authority and her devotion to traditional patriarchal structures meant that she remained dependent on powerful men like John Mitchell or Terence Powderly, through whom she exercised much of her power.

Throughout this biography, one is always aware of the lack of solid evidence. Since Gorn amply demonstrates that Mother Jones fabricated stories in her autobiography, it becomes difficult ever to trust this central source. His argument, that her tales are metaphorically if not literally accurate, is not ultimately persuasive. Do certain metaphorical truths presented by Mother Jones capture anything more than her perception? Did the miners and their wives see things the same way or not? It is impossible, given the book Gorn has written, to answer this question. And given the absence of introspection in her surviving letters, we often cannot understand exactly what motivated her behavior.

Yet however mysterious Mother Jones remains, Gorn's book presents a riveting tale, one that asks new questions and finds new answers. Mother Jones, as interpreted by Gorn, is a more complex person, more clearly rooted in the dynamics of the day, more reflective of the challenges that socialist organizers—especially female ones—faced during this heyday of capitalism. In Gorn's Mother Jones we see, in all her foibles and strengths, not only a remarkable woman but a remarkable age. ■

Julie Greene (greenej@spot.colorado.edu) teaches history at the University of Colorado and is writing a book on the construction of the Panama Canal.

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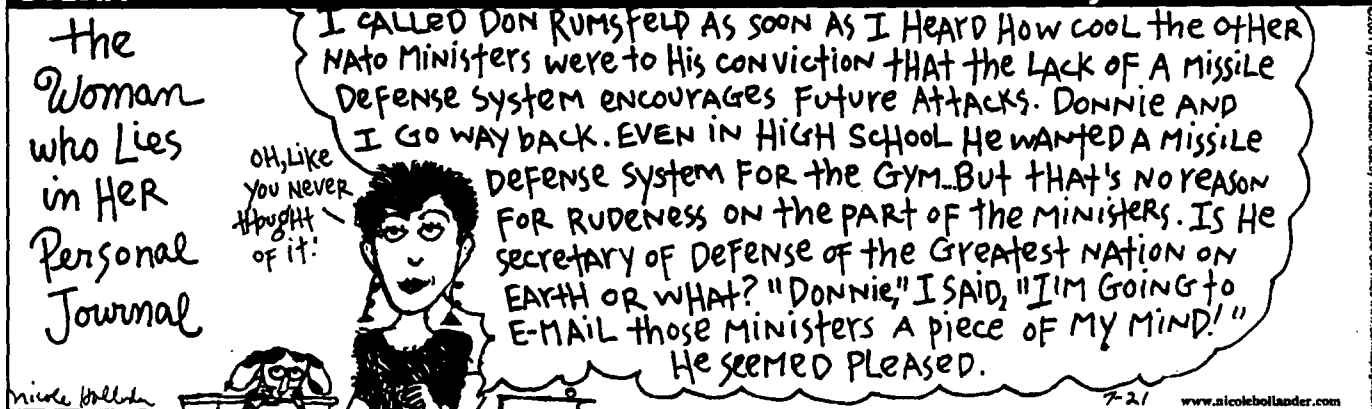
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SYLVIA

By Nicole Hollander



The Woman who Lies in Her Personal Journal

OH, like you never thought of it!

I CALLED DON RUMSFELD AS SOON AS I HEARD HOW COOL THE OTHER NATO Ministers were to His conviction that the lack of a missile defense system encourages future attacks. Donnie and I go way back. Even in high school he wanted a missile defense system for the gym. But that's no reason for rudeness on the part of the ministers. Is he secretary of defense of the greatest nation on earth or what? "Donnie," I said, "I'm going to e-mail those ministers a piece of my mind!" He seemed pleased.

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CONTINUED FROM PAGE 30

phy that sends the combatants scooting up and down buildings and tripping across trees. Yeoh and Ziyi look good while they're trading kicks and wielding a variety of sharp weapons, proving that girls who fight can still be ladies.

But I'm not ready to ascribe liberating potential to these portrayals of women who beat each other up, especially after seeing how the mainstream media gobble it up. In his review of *The Mummy Returns*, CNN critic Paul Clinton applauded the fight scenes: "One nice touch: Evelyn and her evil counterpart Meela are not reduced to cowering wallpaper when the fighting takes place. These babes are right in the middle of the maelstrom." Ergo, babes who fight are better than babes who cower, the operative word here being "babes."

Girl fights superficially seem to offer women a more nuanced, multidimensional persona, an acknowledgement that, yes, women can be angry and violent just like men. And sometimes they want to kill each other, not just their husbands or boyfriends, a thought that must be reassuring to men in a post-feminist world. But how different are these cinematic girl fights from "cat fights," the stereotypical female clashes that have formed the basis of countless male fantasies, sexual and otherwise, such as mud wrestling and its jiggly variants? As Inness argues, the tough woman in popular culture expands the boundaries of traditional female stereotypes while simultaneously ensuring that gender roles are never really turned topsy-turvy.

Kick-box yourself into a frenzy, but when you're done, make sure your mascara isn't smudged.

Just that kind of mixed message about babes who fight was the sub-text of the June 8 match between Laila Ali and Jacqui Frazier-Lyde in their first bout at the Turning Stone Casino in upstate New York.

As the daughters of boxers Muhammad Ali and "Smokin' " Joe Frazier, Laila, 23, and Jacqui, 39, have spent the past year trying to invent boxing careers and a rivalry built on their fathers' legends. Ali, whose ring name is "She Bee Stinging," is a model and

looks it; Frazier-Lyde, known as "Sister Smoke," is an attorney and smart enough to know she can earn more leveraging her father's legacy than trudging to court—a couple of million for stepping into the ring with Ali, who won the 8-round decision.

While women's boxing is soaring in popularity—both as a fitness craze and as a competitive sport—few observers consider the Ali-Frazier match-up as anything other than show biz. Wrote sports columnist Vic Ziegel in the *New York Daily News*: "Ali and Frazier, important names in heavyweight boxing history, are ready to punch at each other again. The difference this time is that it's a hustle. Only the names are the same."

Ziegel is an old timer and perhaps a bit cranky when it comes to women busting onto a traditionally male turf. After all, the hustle is as much a part of boxing as the left hook. What should trouble the public about Laila Ali donning boxing gloves is the other legacy of her father's career—a mind turned to veritable mush from years of pummeling. Is this the way of liberation, the right to beat and be beaten?

Boxing as an avenue to liberation or at least self-realization is the theme of Karyn Kusama's film *Girlfight*, an indie production that KO'd the competition at last year's Sundance Film Festival. It's a fine film, not least because of its star Michelle Rodriguez as Diana, a Latina Rocky who defies her father and channels her rage at the local gym. "In this world of gendered expectations, it's very scary to see violent women," Kusama told Cynthia Fuchs in an interview for Reelimages.com. "Somehow we assume it's the province of men, and in many ways it is. But there's another kind of underlying violence in that assumption, which is that women don't have that rage and capability for violence in themselves."

But as much as I'd like to cheer Diana, watching her punch out other black and brown women—and men—is less inspiring than depressing; boxing as a route out of urban despair and poverty is well-worn and often a dead end. And Kusama's story seems hardly radical today, probably because women boxing nowadays is more yuppie-chic than taboo.

More radical is the plot of the film *Billy Elliot*, in which a working-class English boy forsakes boxing lessons for ballet, sending his coal-mining father and brother into paroxysms of rage. Billy's world is steeped in violence (even more so than Diana's), both at home and outside, where striking miners wage battle against scabs and the police. When Billy sheds his boxing gloves and laces up ballet slippers, it is an act of defiance and courage that feels monumental. His choice is out of oppression and toward self-fulfillment.

Girl fights and the fascination with aggressive, violent women might reflect one part of our reality. But in a culture primed by violence, buying into the male domain of aggression as a way to smash gender stereotypes is really all about getting sucker punched. ■

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BY ANNETTE FUENTES

Marching along the West Side highway of Manhattan recently, my gaze strayed to one of the giant billboards looming above, advertising to a car-bound captive audience. It promoted *The Mummy Returns*, a film sequel to 1999's box office hit. Faces of several of the male characters peered out menacingly, but what really caught my eye was the action at the foreground of the billboard: two women done up in skimpy faux ancient Egyptian-style outfits going at each other with these nasty trident weapons. Forget those moldy old mummies. This movie is selling hot mamas going *mano-a-mano*.

If you can actually sit through the movie, you will learn that the rivalry between archaeologist Evelyn O'Connell and her nemesis

Meela spans a couple of thousand years. Their fight scene, a sort of exhibition match before a pharaoh and his high priest, is an eclectic mix of cartwheels and kick-boxing, spears and broad axes, with some gravity-defying wall climbing thrown in for good measure. All this is performed, need I say, in the most minimal of clothing designed for maximum exposure as the girls throw down.

Now, women in sexy garb is as clichéd as this movie. Actress Angelina Jolie's latest turn as Lara Croft in the film *Tomb Raider* is yet another example of the genre, as the pouty yet tough-as-nails Jolie brings a computer game heroine to cinematic life. In her book *Tough Girls: Women Warriors and Wonder Women in Popular Culture*, Sherrie Inness writes: "Tough girls are in with a vengeance, and they have proven to be quite a lucrative commodity as the latest media sensation. Tough girls are one example of the tendency of media moguls to push the limits of what is acceptable to represent, especially if they think that pushing the limits might help, and not hurt, profits."

WHAT ARE WE FIGHTING FOR?



Inness points to Sarah Connor, the muscular mom-turned-guerrilla fighter of the *Terminator* films, and *Xena: Warrior Princess* as just two examples of the culture's acceptance of—even affinity for—women who'd rather crack skulls than crack eggs for a soufflé.

There's something else going on here, though, with the tough-babe trend, which Inness notes has its origins in the early '60s, with the jumpsuit-clad Emma Peel in *The Avengers*. What stopped me cold in the *Mummy* billboard was the spectacle of the girl fight and the sense of déjà vu it triggered.

Hadn't there been another recent film in which two women really go at it with a vengeance?

Of course, it was *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, the first Chinese-language film to achieve mainstream, popular success among U.S. moviegoers. While actor Chow Yun Fat is the ostensible star, his role is all but overshadowed by the action of his female co-stars, martial artists Michelle Yeoh and Zhang Ziyi. Their fight scenes are the heart of this lushly filmed fable of good and evil, with fantastic choreogra-

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